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Facilitating social and personal growth with simple things

Dr. phil. Jule Hildmann

The University of Edinburgh, UK

There is broad international agreement nowadays that in a world like ours, which is governed by uncertainty, diversity, and fast-paced change, more than a fixed set of knowledge and skills is needed in order to lead a healthy, content, and prosperous private and professional life. Consequently, an increasing number of regional and national school authorities as well as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) call for transferrable key competencies – that to a large part consist of social and personal skills like cooperative behaviour, problem solving strategies and self-management – to be a prime focus of formal and informal education (e.g., Priestly, 2013). In fact, such transferrable skills or “key competencies” (OECD, 2005) are considered indispensable in order to reach a healthy and content private and professional life as well as a prosperous, just, and sustainable society (ibid). Accompanying this reconstruction of curriculum design is a discussion on the ideal pedagogy to achieve these soft goals. Traditional teacher-oriented instruction methods are considered far less suitable to nourish such overarching skills than holistic, interactive, and life-oriented approaches to learning and teaching – such as experiential education (Roberts, 2012).

Experiential Education

This is a general approach to teaching and learning, based on Dewey's (1925, 1938) ideas often referred to as 'learning by doing'. According to the Oxford Dictionary (n.d.), an experience is "practical contact with and observation of facts or events". Experiential education emphasizes the importance of physical and emotional interactions with the surrounding world – and potentially curricular content – to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge and skills (Beard & Wilson, 2006; Roberts, 2012; Kolb, 2015). Especially in the form of *outdoor adventure education*, it has a long standing reputation across the globe to effectively and sustainably raise crucial life skills and competencies (Ewert & Sibthorp, 2014; Ewert & Garvey, 2007; Rehm, 1999). A closer look into the literature and practice reveals distinct regional nuances in the methods and philosophy, which are connected to local geography, culture, and history (Paffrath, 2013; Heckmair & Michl, 2004). This chapter will outline such differences in regard to a small number of concepts, and focus on *simple things* (or *SimpleThings*) which is a related approach developed in Germany.

After explaining some of its key features, empirical evidence for its effectiveness and growing impact is presented. Thoughts on the potential value and ways of application in other countries and cultural contexts form the conclusion of this chapter.

Conceptual framework

The simple things approach is part of a global movement to use experiences – mostly in connection with nature – to develop and train essential personal and social life skills as mentioned above.

Outdoor Adventure Education (OAE)

Outdoor education or (*outdoor*) *adventure education* is an educational approach used in English speaking countries and a number of other regions around the world, such as India, Central and South America, Taiwan (Martin, Cashel, Wagstaff, & Breunig, 2006; Ewert &

Sibthorp, 2014). Its objective is to promote social and personal skills such as decision-making, problem-solving, the ability to motivate oneself and others, and to manage resources and tasks (Martin et al., 2006). This is pursued mainly with outdoor sports such as canoeing, climbing, mountaineering and back packing, and the programs are often several weeks long and in a remote wilderness setting (Ewert & Sibthorp, 2014; Priest & Gass, 2005). Learning is achieved through physical, mental, and socio-emotional challenges in a group context with strong social cohesion (ibid.).

Despite these main general parameters, there is a vast divergence among the actual programs with regard to activities, program structure, target groups, level of intensity from recreational to therapeutic, and so forth. Two strong factors of influence on the actual phenomenology of OAE programs are ‘place’ and culture: The geography and geology of a location determines much of its infrastructure and industry (e.g., agriculture, mining, tourism), which in turn deeply influences a populations frame of mind, attitudes, values, and norms – in short, its culture. The (stereotypical) cultural differences, for example between the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom, in terms of norms, values, interaction, and other factors that are evident in everyday life equally show their impact in the ways (experiential) education is conceptualised and implemented. In line with that, studies have repeatedly suggested that the characteristics and strategies that are perceived as desirable in leaders differ significantly across cultures (Ayman & Korabik, 2010).

In essence, there are fine distinctions between outdoor education, outdoor adventure education, and experiential education. However, since these are also not directly relevant to the topic discussed here, they will not be discussed in further detail here, and the abbreviation OAE will be used in this chapter to denote their combined general concept.

Erlebnispädagogik as German counterpart

Terminology and translations.

Erlebnispädagogik (Epäd) is an approach related to outdoor adventure and/or experiential education in regard to some of the underlying assumptions and methodology (Paffrath, 2013). It is extremely popular, and widely used in Germany and the neighbouring countries in order to effectively promote social and personal growth in informal – and less so, formal – education. Mainly outdoor settings and activities are employed (Bundesverband Individual- und Erlebnispädagogik, n.d.), similar to OAE.

EPäd is a compound of the two words *Erlebnis* and *Pädagogik* – the latter meaning *education*, not *pedagogy*. The German word *Erlebnis* does not have a literal translation in English. It is situated somewhere between *experience* and *adventure*, being formally defined as “an event that is subjectively perceived by someone as impressive” (Duden, n.d.). Equally, neither the term nor the concept of Epäd has a direct equivalent in English.

Similarities and differences of Epäd and OAE.

The intended learning outcomes vary from the previously described approaches to certain degrees. While in OAE the acquisition of technical skills – e.g. paddling strokes for canoeing

– is of equal importance, Epäd is primarily directed at social and personal growth of program participants. Here, the technical skills are considered to be merely a means to an end (i.e., canoeing an activity chosen in order to train coordination of efforts, patience, or the like). An objective shared by both approaches is to promote ecological awareness and sustainable behaviour.

While both approaches make strong use of outdoor locations, OAE stretches this further into remote wilderness settings. This is less so in Epäd, probably because the Germanic countries are much more densely populated than large areas of the USA, Canada, Australia or New Zealand. Hence, Epäd. programs are most often conducted in outdoor centres with some kind of access to woodlands, mountains, caves, rivers or sea shore. However, *city bound* activities – which make deliberate use of urban environments (Crowther, 2005; Deubzer & Feige, 2004; Klein & Wustrau, 2014; Levine, 1978; Welzenis, 1994) – have seen a strong incline over the past years, and well as sensory and mindfulness activities, trust activities, and cooperative initiative games (i.e., a challenge presented to a team or group of people that can only be solved through cooperative behaviour, efficient problem-solving, and – depending on the particular task – other skills that are set out as learning targets; Gilsdorf & Kistner, 2001, 2003, Reiners, 2003).

Some of the working principles of Epäd – and to a large degree OA as well – are

- 'Challenge by choice' (meaning that every individual is entitled and responsible to gauge their own level and direction of challenge and learning).
- To aim for emotional, social, and holistic learning.
- To encourage physically active and interactive 'learning by doing'
- To take conscientious measures to ensure a processing of the experience (either before, during or after the activity)
- To devise and implement active and goal-oriented measures to support the transfer of learning to other and general contexts (Michl, 2011; Heckmair & Michl, 2004).

There is a wealth of English as well as German literature exploring different models of facilitation, with a prominent issue being when and how to review activities (Priest & Gass, 1999; Friebe, 2010; Greenaway, 2007; Simpson, Miller, & Bocher, 2006; Cain, Cummings, & Stanchfield, 2005). The reality in the field however, shows a much stronger emphasis on reviewing and refining reviewing techniques in Epäd as opposed to most OAE programs.

Table 1 summarises the similarities and differences between OAE, Epäd, and the simple things approach that is discussed later in this chapter.

| Examples of main... | OAE | Epäd | SiThi |
|---------------------|--|--|--|
| learning objectives | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical skills (e.g., sport related) • Personal and social skills | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal and social skills | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal and social skills |

| | | | |
|----------------------|--|--|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental awareness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental awareness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Environmental awareness) |
| locations & settings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nearly exclusively outdoors • More or less remote wilderness settings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Predominantly (but not exclusively) outdoors • Natural or urban settings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outdoors or indoors • Everyday work or life settings |
| methods & activities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outdoor sports • Bush craft • Environmental activities • High and low ropes courses, cooperative challenges • And others | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High and low ropes courses • cooperative challenges • Outdoor sports • Bush craft • Environmental skills • And others | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooperative challenges • Activities combined with school or other lessons • Modified everyday activities • And others |
| material or props | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special (outdoor) sports and technical equipment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Varying amounts of special equipment (depending on program) • Paper, pens, etc. for visualisation and process facilitation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whatever is available at a given location • Paper, pens, etc. for visualisation and process facilitation |
| duration of programs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Up to several weeks and even months en bloc • Long-term ongoing (e.g., weekly sessions) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One to five days en bloc • Long-term ongoing (e.g., weekly sessions) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One to five days en bloc • Long-term ongoing (e.g., weekly sessions) |

Table 1. Similarities and differences between outdoor adventure education (OAE), erlebnispädagogik (Epäd), and the simple things approach (SiThi).

Socio-philosophical foundations.

Epäd in general and SimpleThings in particular is a solution- and resource-oriented approach, focussing on the strengths and available resources of individuals and groups. It encompasses a 'growth mindset' (Dweck, 2006) meaning that there is the general assumption that people have a lot more potential than is realised at a given point in time, and that we can improve and grow, amongst others through making mistakes and learning from them (ibid.). It is based on constructivist (Riegler, 2012; Krieg & Watzlawick, 2002) and systemic social philosophy (Thomas & Kreszmeier, 2007; Jordan, Carlile, & Stack, 2008). It implements principles of interactive, multisensory and emotional learning, all of which are supported by evidence of neuropsychological processes in learning and attainment (Armony & Vuilleumier, 2012; Gazzaniga, Ivry, & Mangun, 2014; Heckmair & Michl, 2013; Herrmann, 2009; Hildmann & Nicol, 2014).

Epäd and school curriculum.

The PISA assessments and publications by the OECD on 'key competencies' have urged the German school system to increase their efforts to build competencies and – preferably transferrable – skills in students. This has led to priorities shifting from classical curriculum content and attainment to a more holistic perspective on human development with the socio-emotional health of well-rounded individuals being recognised as a strong and reliable predictor for personal and societal wellbeing and prosperity (OECD, 2005).

Epäd is mostly and traditionally situated outdoors and outside of school (Bundesverband Individual- und Erlebnispädagogik, n.d.). Nevertheless, since field trips and excursions (e.g., for subjects like history or geography) are usually in some ways outdoors as well as experiential, they have become closely associated with Epäd (Gilsdorf & Volkert, 2004). In comparison, the concept of outdoor *learning* in the UK is wider than outdoor *education* as the former is seen as pedagogy to transport school curriculum by taking learning outdoors (Beames, Higgins, & Nicol, 2012; Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2010). Beames and colleagues discuss different zones of outdoor learning (see figure 1), of which, expanding from the school building, the classical sport-oriented type of outdoor education is dominating the outer zones.

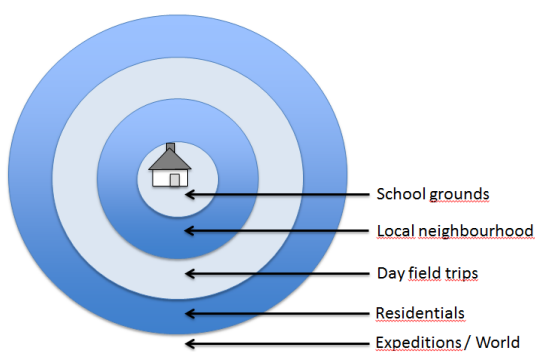


Figure 1. Zones of outdoor learning, expanding from the school building (based on Higgins and Nicol, 2012, p. 44).

The SimpleThings approach

Origins.

One short coming of both OAE and Epäd is that they present extensive requirements in regard to equipment, logistics (e.g., accommodation and transport), and instructor qualifications. These financial and logistic restraints effectively exclude large educational contexts from OAE provisions, such as in many cases schools and social work institutions – both of whom profit immensely from these approaches. In order to overcome this barrier, a PhD research project investigated to what degree and effect principles of Epäd could be transported into a regular classroom setting, relying solely on the conditions that were in place (e.g., no financial support, no means of transport, no sport qualifications of teachers, fixed timetables, and so forth; Hildmann, 2010). Formal details on the project can be found in the

Evidence section below. The results of the study were so compelling, and the implemented factors so simple, that this gave rise to the concept and approach that became known as *simple things* (or *SimpleThings*), which can be used to nurture social and personal growth while – optionally – combining this with school curriculum (Hildmann, 2008).

Key factors for success.

One key factor for the success that generated from this research project was to use merely and deliberately the local environment and everyday material, instead of relying on specialised sport or other equipment. The definition of 'everyday material' is whatever can be found at a given location or setting, and with the effort of no more than a trip to the local supermarket (Hildmann, 2015, 2017a;b). What this comprises will vary greatly with the location: For example sticks, leaves, soil or rocks in a park versus chairs, tables, pens and paper in a classroom. An activity might include devising and visualising a symbol for the team strength(s), which could be drawn on paper in the classroom while scratched into the ground with a stick in the park. Where no resources at all seem available, the symbol could still be formed by the participants with their own bodies or jackets. Indeed, large learning potential stems from reframing the current surrounding as a pool of resources, and in the social interactions involved in identifying these and employing them purposefully in the problem-solving process.

Another crucial factor is that a traditional conception and actions of a teacher as process manager and the holder of knowledge need best to be abandoned. Instead, their impact on the social and person growth in learners is strongly augmented by seeing themselves and acting as facilitators for learning. This is achieved through a stance of empowerment (Thompson, 2006) and growth mindset (Dweck, 2008, 2012), employing systemic methods and questions (Thomas & Kreszmeier, 2007), creating a warm social climate and allowing different alley ways of feedback (Hattie, 2009; Hattie & Yates, 2014). This warm and growth-oriented style is argued to enhance learning more than the challenge and get-out-of-your-comfort-zone approach that is still dominant in OAE practice around the world (Davis-Berman & Bermann, 2002; Leberman & martin, 2003).

The SimpleThings model.

This approach has since seen a strong rise in Germany and is now in positive demand in and outside school contexts. While a number of activities, methods, and practical guidance have been developed specifically as part of the simple things concept, a whole lot of existing activities also cover the three principles of (1) promoting personal and social skills, (2) through experiential education activities – that ideally create a flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) –, using (3) only everyday material (Hildmann, 2008, 2017a, 2017b). See figure 2.

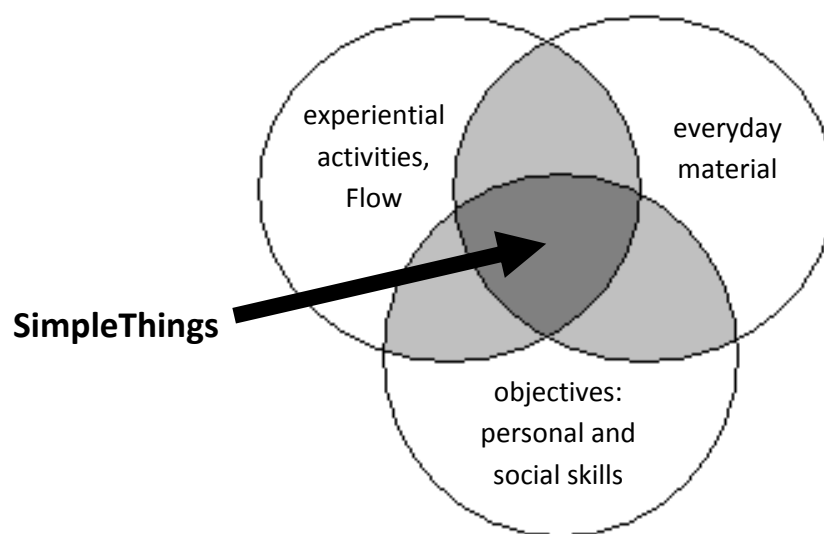


Figure 2. The SimpleThings model

Curricular Content.

As mentioned previously, this approach originates from a PhD project in education and psychology, which investigated how and to what extent school curricular content could be taught and learned using OAE working principles – such as emotional and physically active learning, choice and self-determination, team tasks, and so forth. For details on the research project, see the *Evidence* section below.

Since outdoor sports could hardly be conducted in the class room and even school grounds, the project team sought for existing experiential education activities that could be employed or adapted to transport lesson content (e.g., a team game where students have to direct each other through an obstacle course, training either numeracy skills by giving directions in degrees of a circle, or practicing specific foreign language vocabulary). The activities found in this way were still rather limited in number and feasibility for the required topics. Consequently, new activities were designed, and over time systematic strategies developed on how to transport lesson material and at the same time the 'hidden curriculum' of increasing social and personal skills. One of these strategies was to find or create an interactive metaphor for whatever was supposed to be taught. For example, biochemical processes are represented through large objects or preferably even students themselves, who are being labelled and moved around the room according to the processes in question. A second strategy found efficient was to weave in and out of new content and new skills. An example: The students would be introduced to peer learning (Topping, 2001; Topping, Buchs, Duran, & Keer, 2017) with lesson content they were familiar with. Once they felt confident with peer learning – and had thereby increased their independence, self-reliability and communication skills –, new content would be delivered through peer learning. Further details and the full list of identified strategies can be found in Hildmann (2010).

Requirements on the teachers and facilitators.

If this is so easy and compelling, why has it not long been widely implemented?! Indeed, to teachers and facilitators who pick up the approach easily, this a mystery. The main reason seems to be that In return for being so simple in regards to physical resources, the demands on the educators are potentially higher, namely to:

- Be perceptive to the apparent and hidden topics relevant to a group of participants.
- Have refined knowledge of and practical skills in facilitating learning and group processes.
- Have the skills and mindset to convert occasional misadventures into nevertheless valuable learning opportunities.
- Implement efficient activities for reviewing.
- Devise active measures and strategies to support the transfer of learning.

This requires professional skills as well as personal traits and abilities that all contribute to facilitating growth in learners (Michl, 2016; as cited in Hildmann, 2017a).

What many school teachers find the hardest in adopting this educational approach are the requirements to their self-perception attitudes and stance. In order to increase independence and personal strengths in students, the teacher needs to act as a facilitator of learning, not a traditional classroom instructor. For some this comes naturally, while others need to engage in deep and prolonged critical reflection on the appropriateness of their actions, attitudes, and underlying values and assumptions. While many teachers have adopted this decades ago, it is still far from being the norm, and many opportunities for growth are curtailed by teacher-oriented rather than student- and solution-oriented learning.

Innovativeness

The simple things concept is a variation of Epäd and as such in turn related to some basics of outdoor adventure education. At the same time, it is clearly unique in a very practical and real life-oriented way, since it presents a complete 'use what you got' approach of resourcefulness and sensitivity to a given location and setting. These aspects of innovativeness have also been identified to be some of the factors for the approach's success (see above).

Cost Efficient with no Special Equipment or Qualifications Required

As mentioned above, outdoor adventure education and Epäd take place mostly outdoors (Ewert & Sibthorp, 2014; Bundesverband Individual- und Erlebnispädagogik, n.d. - respectively) with a strong use of outdoor sports such as mountaineering, sailing, backpacking or rafting. All of these require special technical equipment that usually charges a considerable price. In addition, the equipment must be stored and serviced appropriately, and it needs to be replaced at certain intervals due to tear and wear. This causes considerable financial and logistic expenses from program providers. Furthermore, to pursue outdoor activities with organised groups requires professional or semi-professional qualifications that are either government-regulated like in the UK or gained through courses with the sport-specific associations or marine, alpine, or outdoor leadership associations like in the US or central

Europe. To gain these qualifications, one needs to make a significant time and financial commitment – no matter how good value for money they are.

In Epad more so than in OAE, some facilitators specialise in corporate team development with problem-solving activities and traditional facilitation and visualisation techniques, thus using less of the outdoor sports spectrum. Nevertheless, material for this corporate context is often immensely overpriced and does not constitute a noticeable financial advantage over the sport supplies.

This in total poses funding demands that many educational providers in formal and informal education find hard or impossible to meet. The SimpleThings approach aims to make the gains of experiential and outdoor education more widely accessible, including geographical regions that do not have access to specialised sport equipment and institutions that have to manage without a budget allowing for such training courses and material. This aim is achieved by maintaining the underlying principles of OAE and creatively searching for, or developing activities that train the same skills and competencies while utilising only and deliberately local resources. The only special equipment, if you will, that is strongly recommended whenever working actively and/or outdoors with groups, is a first aid kit and some paper and markers to visualise content and results. Both however incur minimal costs.

Flexible and Highly Adaptable to Local Circumstances and Resources

As mentioned before, the concept emphasizes the creative use of whatever location and resources are available. This can be indoors and outdoors, in natural or urban area, school grounds, a park, gym or scout hall, or nearly anywhere else. This shifts the focus from adrenalin-driven sport activities to cooperative initiatives, sensory activities, and other 'soft' methods, which have proven to be at least as effective in terms of achieving positive and sustainable growth in social and personal skills – while being easily applicable, resourceful and thereby accessible to all. Using what is in place promotes a change of perspective on our everyday surrounding that is often taken for granted, which in turn can be a door opener to wider critical reflection on our personal and social lives (Hildmann, 2017b).

Turning Everyday Events into Learning Opportunities

Next to making use of everyday locations and material, the simple things approach also makes a point of raising sensitivity and creativity to turn everyday activities – such as a shared meal, washing, or moving from one place to another – into refined experiential learning opportunities. Here are some simple factors that can be altered in order to achieve this. They are exemplified on the activity of a communal meal.

- **Use of 'handicaps'.** Participants could eat blindfolded or with having their wrists tied to the wrists of the persons sitting next to them around the table. Eating without seeing what food is available on the table as well as on one's own plate requires increased concentration and communication skills. Tying neighbours together forces them to cooperate and be patient in order to all eat enough and without making a complete mess.

- **Change the rules.** One often applied rule or convention is that we eat mainly from our own plate and use our cutlery to transport food into our own mouth. Alternatively though, the participants could be forbidden to feed themselves and/or to eat food from their own plate. This would lead to people having to serve and feed each other. This in combination with the handicap of "no speaking" creates a significant challenge for many people in regard to physical and social coordination, interpret or assume others needs and wishes, self-awareness through having to ask for and accept help, etc.
- **Restrict the resources.** If for example a team is asked to prepare a fruit salad in a short amount of time, while only being given a single knife, then they will have to coordinate quickly and work hand in hand efficiently in order to complete the task on time.
- **Change the place.** Instead of eating at a table, seated on benches or chairs, this meal could take place in a tree (and nobody is allowed to start eating before everybody is served) or under the table, which requires each a different set of social and personal skills, and in addition sparks conversations about habitual conventions and perspectives on other cultures and ways of living.
- **Change the social constellation.** Sharing a course with a friend or loved one may feel comfortable for many, and a familiar thing to do. How about sharing a plate of food with a stranger? What thoughts, concerns, and questions does that provoke? What kind of experiences might participants have when they share each course with a different person in the room? An evaluation phase could focus on individual needs, respecting personal space and privacy, and general rules of interaction in the group.
- **Alter the speed.** Usually, we all have our individual speed when eating. Time pressure or engaging conversations or can naturally speed this up or slow it down. Trying to eat a bowl of soup in exactly 30 min for example, can easily turn into a reflective mindfulness session, which – maybe in combination with a frontloaded impulse for thought – could be a preparatory exercise for a consecutive main activity.

Needless to say, not all of these will be applied at the same time. Instead, they represent a buffet of options from which the facilitators can pick and choose to ideally meet the needs and particularities of a given group, and according to what serves the intended learning outcomes best.

Simple Theory and Practical Guidelines

The theory and practice of simple things draws widely on the available literature and an interdisciplinary body of research (e.g., sources provided throughout this chapter). Nevertheless, since the intention is accessibility and the authors make a deliberate point of presenting the theory in a simple and perspicuous manner. This means avoiding technical terms, providing examples for explanations, developing models to visualise and communicate key issues, simplifying instructions, and discussing in depth salient points of impact in order to help educators increase the effectiveness and quality of their facilitation and learning processes.

The available material also offers simple guidelines on how to develop new learning activities (e.g., a trust activity or cooperative team challenge), modify the level of challenge before and during an activity, create suitable metaphors and narratives around activities, how to turn necessary work elements into engaging learning situations (e.g., forming smaller groups from a plenary), how to turn perceived failures into valuable opportunities for growth, or how to arrange the hello and fare-well phases of an event in ways that promote learning, transfer, and social cohesion (Hildmann, 2017b).

National context

Since Epäd does not directly translate into English terminology and prevailing concepts, it is linked to a unique linguistic and cultural context, as is the simple things approach. It has been argued repeatedly that Germany is one of the birth places of outdoor and adventure education with Kurt Hahn (founder of the *Outward Bound* movement and *erlebnistherapie* as precursor to OAE) starting his career and influence here before fleeing to the UK in world war II. With team spirit, and group identity being viciously misused under Hitler, Epäd went through several phases of rejection and reinvention in alternative shapes over the following decades and until today, which has led to a different concept than elsewhere in the world (Paffrath, 2013; Heckmair & Michl, 2004).

There has been a one-way flow of information and literature, with Germany, Austria and Switzerland having access to developments in English speaking countries, while little has been translated of the OAE innovations in the German speaking regions. Therefore, a somewhat insular context has developed, which like *friluftsliv* in Scandinavian countries is rooted in a specific cultural and geographical heritage. This seems unfortunate, as they have much to offer beyond national boundaries. One example of the particular slant Epäd has taken is that due to wilderness being scarce in Germany, programs may take place mainly or in some cases completely indoors, as opposed to it being *outdoor* education. Also, so-called ‘soft methods’ such as mindfulness sessions, sensory activities and Land Art (art in and with nature; Malpas, 2016; Pouyet, 2013; Tufnell, 2006; Wallis & Kastner, 2005) are equally used and appreciated as (outdoor) sports (Paffrath, 2013; Heckmair & Michl, 2004; Reiners 1995). In fact, these seemingly inconspicuous activities are arguably more efficient in surfacing relevant matters and to facilitate deeply personal experiences and growth than adrenalin driven adventure activities (Davis-Berman & Berman, 2002; Hildmann, 2017a, b).

Evidence

Although the bulk of publications connected to the *simple things* approach are brought forth by the single author of this chapter, its simplicity and resourcefulness seem to have been compelling to a wide range of practitioners and experts.

Since the first mention of ‘simple things’ (Hildmann, 2008) in the only professional journal on experiential education published in German language, there has been a rapidly growing interest in Germany in the general philosophy and practical activities of this approach. Following are pieces of evidence for the impact *simple things* have had on the experiential education landscape in – so far restricted to – the German speaking countries.

Research

As already explained, the concept grew out of a PhD project that investigated how and to what effect the main working principles of Epäd could be transported into everyday classroom lessons (Hildmann, 2010). Three classes of eighth grade students (N = 23) were taught subjects (e.g. history, science, art – as assigned by the school to the project teacher) using the approach for two to four lessons per week over a 12 week period. Effects were measured pre, post, and approximately six months follow-up in respect to social and personal skills; behaviour, engagement, and attainment in lessons; school grades in report cards; and other factors of potential impact. The methods employed in this qualitative quantitative mixed-method research study ranged from statistically evaluated questionnaires over participatory observations and semi-structured qualitative interviews to informal self-assessment of the students. The students were attending a school for additional support needs. This covered a wide spectrum, including sensory impairment, socio-emotional challenges, learning disabilities, autism, ADHD, and physical handicaps.

The results showed significant increase in a range of social and personal skills in all participating students, particularly in regard to acting more independently and self-organised, demonstrating pro-social behaviour and communication patterns, and overall class cohesion. Even the attainment improved in nearly all children over a six and twelve months period, as measured in their formal report cards. Teacher interviews presented deeper insights into the process and implementation of the project, for example that impressive props and activities were seen as less relevant than subtle elements of facilitation (i.e., how tasks were presented, questions responded to, creative solutions valued and students being explicitly given the ownership and responsibility of managing tasks and processes). A salient point was that presenting group tasks in this manner stimulated positive group dynamics while at the same time every single student was able to grow from the approach in ways individually relevant to them. Two control groups of (a) students at similar schools nearby, and (b) local regular schools were included, which confirmed the likeliness of the effects being caused by the project intervention. The positive development of students across the board also indicates that the approach is beneficial for all children and youth, not 'merely' for individuals with additional support needs.

The research project was merited with a Phd 'magna cum laude' from the Ludwigs-Maximilians-University in Munich, a German elite university. Part of the examiners' rationale for the distinction was the high degree of practical value of the intervention format and the documentation. The dissertation was published online, and deliberately avoided overly academic language in order to be accessible and of practical value for scholars and practitioners alike. Numerous enquiries and feedback from students and professionals through email and personal communication confirm that this is taking place as intended. Excerpts of the dissertation are increasingly used in handouts for training sessions and courses.

Training courses

Through formal and informal networks, a considerable demand for presentations and workshops for different professions has been expressed to the author. Over the past few years,

training courses have been held for a range of academic and vocational institutions (e.g., University of Augsburg, Ostbayrische Technische Hochschule Regensburg, Centrum für Erlebnispädagogik Volkersberg, Evangelische Landjugendakademie Altenkirchen – all in Germany) as well as special events and (international) conference presentations in the disciplines of psychology, special and general education, social work, denominational education, and games-based learning (e.g., International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement 2016; Lernort Bauernhof 2016; Erleben & Lernen 2010; 2012; European Conference on Games-Based Learning 2009; Internationale Konferenz Psychologie im Netzwerk 2007; 2008).

The ministry of education in Bavaria, Germany, piloted a teacher training course on Epäd and simple things related methods in school in May 2017 at the Centrum für Erlebnispädagogik Volkersberg. The conclusion of the ministry from this is to make this training available to all Bavarian school teachers in the future, for which further steps are now taken.

Publications

Professor Dr. Werner Michl, chair emeritus at the Georg Ohm University of Applied Sciences in Nuremberg, is one of the leading figures in the field of Epäd to date. His list of international publications and presentations is extensive (Michl, n.d.), and his books are used as standard text books and core reading for literally every student training in this profession. In his key note at the international conference *Erleben und Lernen* 2014 in Augsburg, he explicitly promoted the simple things approach as a promising countermovement to the ‘higher, faster, more (tech stuff)’ trend of consumerism nowadays, which has not bypassed our field. He also called for more publications on its theory and practice (Michl, 2014).

Various parts of the simple things concept have been made available to different audiences in formal and informal education through a spectrum of publications. These range from plain course handouts to newsletter and journal articles, commentaries, conference contributions, and most recently entire monographs (Hildmann, 2017a, 2017b, 2015, 2014, 2011, 2010, 2008; Hildmann & Moseley 2012; Hildmann & Seuffert 2010). A whole special edition of the German journal in outdoor adventure education, *erleben & lernen*, was dedicated to simple things in 2015 (Fengler, Jagenlauf & Michl, 2015).

There are two main publishers serving the academic and practitioner community around Epäd: Ziel in Augsburg, and Ernst Reinhardt in Munich. Both have been urging for books on this approach for several years. In January 2017, Ziel finally released a compendium of simple things activities (i.e., Hildmann, 2017a). The book contains 60 practical exercises divided into the six areas: Park and fields, Forest, Night, City, Class/seminar room, and Gym hall. These are accompanied by introductory texts on the potential for learning in each of these areas, safety advice and specific tips and tricks. The second book is published with Ernst Reinhardt in autumn 2017, and focuses on how to facilitate personal and social growth as explained in the *Innovativeness* section above. A translation and adaptation of a combined monograph with an English publisher is currently in preparation.

Transnationalness

The factors that make this approach appealing to practitioners have been outlined above, and are by no means restricted to the German context.

Simple things pursue transnationally relevant objectives

Education is the way to a prosperous, healthy, and sustainable future – on an individual as well as global scale. And it is widely accepted nowadays that this does not merely comprise a fixed set of technical knowledge, but a wide spectrum of transferrable skills. Many governments aim to raise the quality and effectiveness of their educational systems in response to PISA results, state of the art research findings (such as Hattie's vast meta-analysis on factors that impact on learning; Hattie, 2009), and contemporary influences on individuals and society, such as continuous uncertainty, social mobility and diversity. Some school systems are already exploring ways to promote key competencies and transferrable skills alongside curricular content (e.g., Scotland, Canada, and the Scandinavian countries). However, nearly all of them still have a far way to go, especially until political claims and suggested principles have truly permeated the everyday practice of formal and informal education. The simple things approach could make a valuable contribution here, as it is easy to grasp and to implement – as long as educators are willing to change not just instruction methods but also their attitudes and interaction styles (see the section *Requirements on the teachers and facilitators* above).

Incidentally, it has been demonstrated that the set of social and personal skills claimed by the OECD and some progressive national curricula (e.g. the *Curriculum for Excellence* in Scotland; Scottish Government, n.d.) show great overlaps with the outcomes frequently reported on in outdoor and adventure education programs (e.g., Rickinson, Dillon, Teamey, Morris, Choi, Sanders, & Benefield, 2004; Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997; Hans, 2000; Cason & Gillis, 1994; Wilson & Lipsey, 1998; Fiennes, Oliver, Dickson, Escobar, Romans, & Oliver, 2015). This suggests that forms of experiential education and Epäd might be ideally suited to nurture these skills and competencies, which of course would be beneficial for many countries and cultures (Hildmann, 2016 ICSEI).

Simple things are suitable for formal and informal education

Much of this chapter has addressed the approach's ability to be combined with lesson content. However, this is not a requirement, and the much larger audience so far is based in informal education, such as youth and social work, team development programs, and community education. Raising confidence, self-efficacy, social and environmental responsibility or dealing with conflicts – to just name a few typical learning outcomes – are objectives shared by youth clubs, the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme, Scouts, drug and violence pre- and intervention programs, empowerment courses for persons with additional support needs and fringe populations, social workers, youth at risk programs, denominational groups, and professional training courses alike. Many simple things activities can be easily tweaked to fit a certain target group, for example with the following strategies.

- Adjusting the level of challenge in a task (e.g., by adding rules, limiting permitted resources or time, introducing handicaps (as already explained in the section *Turning Everyday Events into Learning Opportunities*).
- Framing and linking the activities in an action narrative that is intriguing and engaging for the particular age and target group (e.g., animals of the forest for toddlers, Olympic games for children, an alien or zombie invasion for teenagers, and a secret agent mission for adults).
- Adopting a leadership style that is most suitable and supportive to the needs and level of (group) development of a present group (e.g., the level of support and presence that is need from the facilitator versus giving more responsibility and ownership of the processes to the participants)
- The type and depth of evaluation that accompanies an activity (e.g., no reviewing at all, short and easy verbal or nonverbal evaluation activities, complex multi-step measures before, during and after a core activity to emphasize and realign actions with targets).

Many of the publications around simple things explain in detail how such adaptations can be designed and implemented to ideally support a specific group in achieving their individual and shared learning objectives.

The approach is inclusive and accessible to all

Many educational providers, and wider geographical regions, are in threat of or already impacted by poverty. This means that unless educational and charitable sponsors step in, the classic outdoor education programs with long expeditions and expensive outdoor sports are unobtainable to them. Whether or not these populations are more or less in need of such educational programs than more affluent ones, is debatable. The simple things approach however is accessible to all, because once the principles are adopted, it can basically be implemented with bare hands. The only training required is in understanding general principles of learning and communication, how to lead and manage groups, and essential soft skills in facilitation in order to lead and enhance learning processes.

Simple things can be adjusted to other cultures and places

Based on the key features already discussed of this approach, it is plainly evident how simple things can be easily transported into alternative cultural and geographic settings. The explicit responsiveness to local features and resources makes lends itself ideally for a transnational application. And in fact, as insightful as it is to compare the already existing adaptations and experiences with for example a specific team game in different age and educational context, as enriching might it be to explore, collate and compare the particularities in different cultures and geographical regions. The only common denominator apparent so far is that the underlying socio-philosophical stance and interaction style (as described in section *Requirements on the teachers and facilitators*) needs to be adopted as it has been identified as an – if not the – most salient factor of impact on the success of an educational intervention with simple things.

The main factor that has prevented the dissemination of the simple things approach beyond the German speaking countries is a dearth of publications in English language and/or translation of the existing material. The planned production of a book with theoretical background, practical guidance, and hands-on activities is hoped to bridge this gap. Meanwhile, practitioners are encouraged to enjoy brainstorming and experimenting with their own local environment and available 'everyday material' to explore a bit of the potential that lies therein – and maybe even come up with their own activities and applications.

Conclusion

The simple things approach is a variant of erlebnispädagogik and experiential education, following mostly the same principles and philosophy as OAE. Yet its minimalism in respect to props and organisational effort forms a stark contrast to the way OAE is dominantly practiced in the English speaking world. Replacing the adrenalin-rich experiences in adventure sports with a slow-down stance and an emphasis on utilising and appreciating the local surrounding and resources makes it easily accessible and affordable even for educational providers with restricted financial means. This place-responsiveness also renders the approach ideally suited to be applied widely across linguistic and cultural borders. With some experience and creativity, thematic topics such as school subjects can also be delivered with this approach, pursuing a parallel increase of attainment and socio-personal skills, which delivers to the current call for raising key competencies in youth to make them fit for life.

A lot of the simple things concept seems logical and common sense. Sadly enough though, the tendency in most societies today is still towards more technology, action, and high frequency sensory input – rather than to explore the richness inherent in simplicity. Therefore, the practical application and evidenced success of the simple things approach fills a need of modern times, and holds value for formal and informal education on a broad transnational level.

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